

Review of *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam* by Evren Savcı (Duke University Press)

by Leelan Farhan | Book Reviews, Issue 10.2 (Fall 2021)

ABSTRACT Evren Savcı's *Queer in Translation* presents an alternative, both in methodology and analysis, to the Orientalist analytical frameworks typical of Western scholars studying queer politics in Middle Eastern regions. Specifically, Savcı analyzes the rise of Turkey's Adalet ve Kalınma Partisi (AKP; in English, the Justice and Development Party) to show how the AKP's increased securitization and oppression of marginalized communities—including, but not limited to, Turkey's LGBTQ community—is the result of the marriage of Islam and neoliberalism. Savcı produces compelling case studies that reveal how Turkey's weaponization of religion, morality, and capitalism serve to secure the nation against dissenting citizens. From the discourse surrounding the complicated murder of a gay Kurdish man, to unlikely solidarities between religious hijabi women and LGBTQ activists, and the public commons that became Gezi Park, Savcı's critical translation methods reveal how the language to construct and resist securitization in Turkey are far more nuanced than simple attribution to solely Islamist extremism or Western neoliberal influence.

KEYWORDS politics, gender, queer, sexuality, Islam, Turkey, translation studies

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Discussions of queer politics in Middle Eastern nations from Western scholars frequently homogenize the region, analyzing Middle Eastern politics and experiences through Orientalist frameworks in direct opposition to Western neoliberalism. In her new book, *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam*, Evren Savcı departs from dominant frameworks of queer politics, using critical translation studies and ethnography to produce a compelling analysis of how neoliberal Islam in Turkey weaponizes religion, morality, and capitalism to secure the nation against "marginal" identities—both queer and otherwise. From the ways in which solidarities between hijabi and LGBTQ activists were forged and broken, to narratives around the death of a Kurdish gay man to the uprising at Gezi Park, Savcı's ethnographic case studies reveal how the language and narratives used to construct and resist securitization in Turkey are neither the sole product of right-wing Islam, nor of neoliberalism. Rather, it is the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's marriage of both ideologies that shaped the current political narratives in Turkey, as well as queer and feminist activists' methods of resistance.

In outlining Turkey's complex history, including its desire to Westernize itself in contrast to the rest of the Middle East, Savcı elucidates how Turkey itself ruptures Orientalist binaries of "West as oppressor" and "East as oppressed" and provides a new perspective against the infantilizing focus on Islamophobia. From its Ottoman history as an imperial and colonizing force against many minority groups such as the Kurdish and Armenian people—which is ongoing to this day—to its Romanizing of the Turkish alphabet, invasion of Syria, and its aspirations to integrate into the European Union, Savcı shows how Turkey's history is deeply intertwined and influenced by Western notions of capitalism, colonization, and neoliberalism, as well as both democratic and right-wing Islam. As such, Turkey's transition from a secular regime, to democratic Islam, to its current right-wing regime cannot be explained by either "colonial mimicry or the frameworks of Islamophobia or homonationalism" (24). This is the crux of Savcı's argument.

To make this argument, each chapter of the book centers around an event or physical space pivotal in Turkish queer activism during the AKP regime from 2001 to present. The book follows a rough chronological outline of the AKP's transition from moderate democratic governance to increasing authoritarianism. In Chapter 1, Savcı describes a unique discourse of queer politics that emerged from the solidarity of Islamic feminists, LGBT, Kurdish, and Armenian activists against the state—a politics of *zulüm* (cruelty). During the AKP's early days, government officials inflamed tensions between secularist LGBT activists and Islamic feminists by frequently pitting them against one another. For example, Savcı shows how the new terms "LGBT rights" and "homophobia" were deliberately employed on national television to place hijabi activists and queer activists in opposition to one another by assuming a universal understanding of these terms. However, rather than focusing on differences in ideology, Savcı shows how all activists and non-profits worked together to vehemently oppose state-sanctioned *zulüm*. As such, this chapter is a testament to how Turkish queer and feminist politics refuse reductive binaries of Western discourse (secular queer politics) versus Eastern discourse (Islamic morals and interpretation), and instead, offer an alternative "space of negotiation" to, as Savcı states, "listen differently" (52).

In Chapter 2, Savcı focuses on the death of a Kurdish gay man, Ahmet Yıldız, and the honor-killing narrative that originated in British newspapers. In analyzing her interview with the sole witness of the crime, Savcı unpacks the honor-killing discourse surrounding Ahmet's death, showing how it proliferated despite a lack of evidence to support such a theory, traveling across the world to become the example of conservative Islam's "resistance to the rule of law" in a country that is becoming "progressive" (54). To do so, Savcı traces the physical and lingual translation of "honor-killing" and "outness" from Western media back to Turkey, contrasting the reductive story told in the media with testimonies from Ahmet, his friends, and the sole witness and second victim of the crime, Darama. Darama's interview with Savcı reveals alternative motives for Ahmet's murder involving political corruption, religious morality, and Darama herself. In light of Darama's testimony, Savcı casts significant doubt upon the honor-killing theory, problematizing narratives of Turkey as a beacon of neoliberal progress in the Middle East.

In addition to investigating the theories behind Ahmet's murder, Savcı discusses an opinion piece written by Ahmet about his coming out as evidence of the complexities of being

"out." Contrary to reductive Western and homonormative notions of "outness" as being something to be proud of, or Arab queer scholars' critique of outness as "white and heteronormative," Savcı's critical translation reveals that Ahmet's story is much more complex. As Savcı highlights, Ahmet was proud to be out, but also sad at the tensions it caused in his familial life, warning others not to come out if they fear the same. In these ways, Savcı's thorough analysis reveals how narratives surrounding Ahmet's death reproduced the neoliberal framing of Western progress (Turkey) versus Eastern backwardness (Kurds), and simplified concepts of "outness" and familial relations according to liberal ideals, all the while diverting attention away from Turkey's ongoing state-sanctioned violence against Kurdish people. Importantly, in analyzing Ahmet's death in its entirety, with all its complex details, *Queer in Translation* itself is a testament to the possibility of "envisioning other ways of understanding his life and death" (79).

In Chapter 3, Savcı discusses state-sanctioned violence against trans women sex workers and challenges the notion currently pervasive in queer studies that hate crime bill advocacy is unequivocally a symptom of homonormativity. Rather than necessarily increasing policing or encouraging the adoption of neoliberal ideals, she argues, hate crime laws potentially force the state to recognize itself and its systems as perpetrators of this violence. Whereas in Western countries like the United States, hate crime bills tabled in favor of the LGBTQ community assume a benevolent protection by police, Savcı's analysis of the AKP government's history makes this point irrelevant in the Turkish activist context. This is because, as her fieldwork with trans women in Turkey shows, the AKP government gradually moved from overt state violence, to fines and urban gentrification and off-loaded physical violence onto "deep citizens" (81). While the AKP government focused on implementing its neoliberal "urban development programs" by fining trans women individually, introducing property titles, and forcing cumbersome mortgages that were sure to be defaulted on, ministers made statements encouraging "honorable citizens" to "shoot a bullet on behalf of the state" (101). Indeed, in both 2006 and 2012, these "deep citizens," as Savcı terms them, violently attacked trans women who refused to leave their gentrifying neighborhoods, and not a single police officer stopped the attacks (101). Thus, Savcı argues, the physical violence against trans women was not replaced; rather, "one was superimposed upon the other" (80) as the government called upon "honorable" citizens to do their dirty work, flipping the Western argument against "hate crimes" on its head (101).

Savcı ends Chapter 3 with the stories of trans women living and working out of a *koli* house (informal brothel) to highlight how "their activism against hate involved imagining a different kind of life altogether *for all*, away from state terror as well as neoliberal precarities" (108, emphasis mine). To quote a trans woman, Esra, "We don't live. We serve states. We serve those who govern, those parliamentarians, those ministers . . . those who exploit us" (106). And as such, Savcı suggests "that the voices of trans women activists to be found in these pages make a case for listening with curiosity to similar demands made elsewhere" (82). With that, Savcı, expertly encapsulates both the complexity and the universality of queer politics in a neoliberal Islamic state, and beyond.

Chapter 4 continues this vein of thought, where Savcı compares the current focus on identity politics and criticism within the queer progressive activism of academia's ivory

towers to the “magical” solidarity that formed in the Gezi Park commons, arguing that the former classes political subjectivity for the purpose of cultural capital. To highlight this classism and exclusionary politics, Savcı discusses academic activists’ negative sentiments towards a woman-only queer bar, Kadinka, due to their constant “fighting” and “sexually aggressive female masculinity” (114). However, Savcı’s analysis reveals that these feelings are largely rooted in stereotypes of lower-class Turkish masculinity, making the compelling argument that there are limits to social justice activism rooted in criticizing another’s language. Namely, to have the right language, to engage in politics at a theoretical level, is classist and not always productive. In addition to being exclusionary, frameworks of criticism offer little sense of community and joy in the face of neoliberal fascism (111). In comparison, the Gezi Park public commons offers us all a glimpse into the possibility of a movement rooted in care, solidarity, joy, and ultimately, a future outside of the confines of economic, social, and emotional precarity, despite political differences—or even indifferences (111).

Queer in Translation is an incisive and profound analysis of the unique elements driving neoliberal Islam, as well as queer resistance. By revealing the complexity behind the weaponization of both Western economics and religious morality, Savcı contextualizes Turkish queer politics beyond a West-as-oppressor/East-as-oppressed or Islam versus modernity binary, which is sorely needed in discussions of Middle Eastern queer politics. But Savcı’s work does not end there. In her description of Gezi Park commons, Savcı offers all activists hope. Faced with the neoliberal Islamist government’s intent on “killing joy” (122), Gezi Park created a place of coexistence, where activists resisted through humor, love, and community care. No longer queer, feminist, environmental activists, or even soccer fans or “apolitical youth,” Turkish citizens shed their fixation on identity and language politics to come together to realize that marginalization against some is marginalization against all. As Savcı concludes, “knowing that being the marginal subjects of the neoliberal Islamic regime that thrives by dispossessing people of commons and of dignified lives is perhaps the only way one can be sure one is in a quest *for a life worth living*” (141, emphasis mine).

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